STUDENT NAME AND SURNAME: FATHIMA RAZACK

SUBJECT: HIGHER EDUCATION TEACHING PROJECT

AN ANALYSIS OF THE ACADEMIC LEARNING CHALLENGES FACED BY FIRST YEAR STUDENTS IN A DURBAN PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION

LECTURER: CLODAGH MANNION-NASH

Table of Contents

Abstract

This study makes visible the experiences of students transitioning to higher education from high school and previously marginalised backgrounds in South Africa. The structure of South African higher education institutions is alleged to perpetuate epistemic deafness through clinging to the past and westernised curriculum. In line with decolonial perspectives, the research adopted the interpretivist paradigm to engage first-year students in sharing academic learning challenges they faced when they transitioned from high school to a higher education institution. Designed as a case study, data for this research was collected using qualitative methodologies to enable an experiential understanding of the challenges faced by students in the transition process. Results reveal that the students in their first year of studying at a higher education institution face several academic learning challenges some of which are necessitated by a lack of preparation and unmet expectations. The institution lacks recognition of students from marginalised contexts, and their limited potential to re-shape higher education is systematically limited at enrolment. Students who grew up in underserved communities find it difficult to quickly adapt to the current online learning styles and access the English language. The study recommends that for students to thrive, the institution has to meet the students at their point of need through carefully designed strategies that include but are not limited to group discussions, extra lessons, tutorials, and workshops on academic writing skills.

1. Introduction

The transition from high school to tertiary education is a process that encompasses a lot of changes and adjustments which can be complex for some students. This study investigated the academic learning challenges faced by first-year students when they transitioned from high school to a higher education institution. According to Nester (2016), a transition is any event or movement that results in a change within a person's routine, environment, relationships, or viewpoint. For this study, the focus was on the transition process which was defined as the movement process taken by learners from high school to a higher education level. This transition process involves several alterations and adjustments which can be perceived differently by each student and can potentially become challenges for learners going through that process (Thornton, 2016). This study looked at these differences in the academic learning challenges experienced by each student during this transition process.

Students are clouded with expectations in the pre-transition phase and should adapt to the post-transition phase (Thornton, 2016). Bridging the gap between expectations in the pre-transition phase and adaptation or reality in the post-transition phase is very crucial to students as it presents both academic and social challenges. Hassel and Ridout (2018) assert that during the transition, the gap between students' prior anticipations and the realities of higher education life may cause significant distress, poor academic performance, and high rates of drop-outs if not properly dealt with and can potentially become a huge challenge to first-year students. Some academic challenges that were pinpointed in the 2015 National Senior Certificate diagnostic report included poor reading skills, incapacity by learners to interpret examination questions correctly, poor language skills as well as problems of comprehending specific subject content (Department of Basic Education [DoE], 2015). According to Hassel and Ridout (2018), these challenges vary from person to person and are therefore important to investigate. Nickols (2016) explains that change is a challenge or a problem because it involves moving from one state (environmental, intellectual, sociocultural, economic, political, technological, or legal) to another. In such a movement there are concerns on what impact this transformation has on different individuals. Nester (2016) mentions that in university setups a student's transition experience encompasses the kind of context, and impact of the change, how the student reacts to the transition and assessment of the transition, establishing new

associations and behaviour patterns, developing a support system and coping resources available to the student. All these components need scrutiny as they are challenges faced by first-year students.

The different transitional components such as a new learning environment, new ways of learning that are experienced by first-year students are crucial to predict the students' academic performance (Alder, 2018). These challenges can become barriers for an easy transition from high school to a higher education institution and are important factors that can determine the retention and performance of first-year students (Thornton, 2016). Therefore, there is a need to investigate these challenges faced by first-year students. McGhie (2012), reported that it is costly to have first-year students dropping out, and it is of great concern that there is a high dropout rate of students at higher education institutions throughout the globe. Similarly, Deen and Leonard (2015), reported that several students in South Africa are dropping out in their initial year of studies because of various challenges. This study looked at the transitional academic learning challenges that might be promoting the high rate of dropouts among first-year students and the results of this study can be used by policymakers and other stakeholders for planning and policy implementation.

2. Research Paradigm

This study utilised the interpretivist research paradigm. The interpretivist paradigm has its origins in the philosophical traditions of hermeneutics and phenomenology, and the German sociologist Max Weber is usually credited with being the major influencer of the paradigm (Chowdhury, 2014). As a result of the shortcomings and limitations of positivism, the interpretivist paradigm became a divergence from positivism and it aimed at capturing the lives of participants in order to understand and to interpret the meaning (Nieuwenhuis, 2016). The interpretivist, therefore, is centred on exploring the complexity of social phenomena with the aim of understanding it from the participants' view. This study focused on investigating the academic learning challenges of first-year students, which means this research paradigm is apt for this study as it will allow the researcher to understand the experiences of the participants. Additionally, Chowdhury (2014) posits that the interpretivist refers to the approaches which highlight the meaningful nature of human character and involvement in both social and cultural life. In essence, the interpretivist research paradigm allows the research to understand the different dynamics that affect

people's behaviour and participation in certain things. The study also investigated certain occurrences that might be contributing to the academic learning challenges that are faced by first-year students.

The interpretivist research paradigm looks at what is considered as reality by people. According to interpretivists, facts are not objective and neutral, mainly in the social sciences (Denzin & Lincolin, 2013). Instead, what is factual depends largely on the context and people's interpretation of information (Denzin & Lincolin, 2013). Truth, according to the interpretivist, has multiple interpretations. There is no objective reality in the world. This study, therefore, used this paradigm to understand the participants' reality. The academic learning challenges faced by first-year students is their reality. Their experiences can only be accurately described or explained by the participants. Additionally, as asserted by Thanh and Thanh (2015), the interpretivist paradigm permits the researcher to view the world through the views and experiences of the participants. This means that in seeking the answers for this study, the researcher used the participants' experiences to construct and interpret data presenting understanding from gathered data. Interpretivists consider an understanding of the circumstances in which any form of study is conducted as essential to the interpretation of collected data (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). Whilst the positivist paradigm which is under the objectivism epistemology focuses on experimental designs by looking at the relationship between variables; the interpretivist paradigm allows a close encounter with participants which allows the researcher to get detailed explanations and insight into what is essential for the study.

Thanh and Thanh (2015) state that the interpretivism paradigm is about understanding the world of human experience. The paradigm allowed the researcher to understand the human (first-year students) experience. Like many studies under the interpretivism paradigm, this study utilised a qualitative approach. This study utilised a qualitative methodology to dig deeper into what the real academic learning challenges are and probe responses from individuals to get a clear picture of those challenges. In this paradigm, the focus is on understanding the lived experiences and to explore the way the subjects interpret and make sense of the world in which they stay (Ormston, Spencer, Barnard & Snape, 2014). This focus is in line with what the study seeks to do, understanding the experiences of the participants. Interpretivists postulate that the subjective interpretation of reality enables that reality to be fully understood (Dhingra & Dhingra, 2012). So, in essence, the use of this paradigm ensures that the researcher can use the experiences of

first-year students to understand the challenges they are facing in their first year at university.

Despite having several strengths, the interpretivist paradigm has its weaknesses. According to Pham (2018), one of the weaknesses of the paradigm is that it seeks to obtain a deeper understanding and knowledge of phenomena within its natural context limiting the results to the research objects rather generalizing the results to the general population and other contexts. Resultantly, the paradigm tends to leave out a gap in substantiating the validity and practicality of research findings using scientific procedures. This study aimed to understand the academic learning challenges of the first year within the research site not with the aim of generalizing results to all first years in the country. The researcher is aware of the different structures and cultures in different higher education institutions; therefore, generalization of results is impossible. However, a scientific procedure for conducting the study was followed to ensure that data validity and usefulness is guaranteed.

Secondly, the interpretivist paradigm has been criticized for its subjective ontological view. Mack (2010) argues that the ontological view of the paradigm tends to be subjective rather than objective. Pham (2018) states that, for this reason, the study's findings are sometimes unquestionably affected by the researcher's interpretation, beliefs, values, reasoning, or cultural orientation which results in bias. The researcher remained as objective as possible by making use of the research instruments which was designed to elicit data scientifically and objectively. The last weakness raised by Pham (2018) is that the interpretivist paradigm does not fully address the political and ideological effect on knowledge and social reality. The author further expands this stating that the paradigm focuses on understanding the current phenomena rather than concentrating on the problems related to the empowerment of individuals and society. This limitation largely depends on the study's objectives. By providing suggestions on how to deal with challenges faced by first-year students, this study did not neglect the political and ideological effect on knowledge and social reality. The interpretivist paradigm is best suited for this study, not only because it permits the researcher to elicit information from the participant's reality but also within their context which allows for the collection of rich and insightful data. This paradigm will help the researcher to focus on the experience of each individual. The paradigm allows the researcher to be able to get insightful information based on the related information provided by the person that is experiencing the problem under investigation.

3. Literature Review

The preparation for the academic learning challenges among first-year students in South African tertiary institutions is important. Therefore, the transition process presents first-year students with a new challenge which might be hard for some to handle that they end up dropping out or performing poorly in their studies. According to Pather (2018), more than 40% of first-year students in higher education institutions drop out. Additionally, Swartz, Mahali, Arogundade, Khalema, Rule, Cooper, Molefe and Naidoo (2017) argue that in South Africa, higher education is crammed with several problems with the major ones being the high failure rate among students (projected at 55%) and low completion rates on time, with only 1 in 4 students finishing their degree programme within the stipulated time. This study by Swartz *et al.* (2017) found that among the key issues that are causing high failure rate and the low completion rate is the heavy workload that first-year students must deal with when they move from high school to higher education institutions. Lowe and Cook (2003) purport that first-year students tend to find the transition from high school to university difficult. It is against this backdrop that the present study investigates transitional challenges faced by first-year students.

The transition from high school to university is accompanied by several academic changes that first-year students find challenging. One of the changes that first-year students struggle with is the manner of academic writing which changes from high school to higher education level. To explain this challenge, Naong, Zwane, Mogashoa and Fleischmann (2009) argue that many first-year students struggle to comprehend the necessity for detailed referencing and unimpassioned expression of ideas. Mbirimi (2013) also found that it is difficult for first-year students to move from high school literacies to university academic literacies.

There exists a concern that first-year students have difficulties in grasping new basic concepts of the new courses that are usually more than what they were accustomed to in high school. Explaining this concern, Naong *et al.* (2009) posit that first-year students can also be affected by the vast content contained in the higher education curriculum and the adjustment of grasping new concepts in a number of new fields or disciplines before they can engage with their application to their selected profession.

The content-related confusion at times limits the students' ability to frame and ask relevant questions. Fook and Sidhu (2015), observe that students should not only be taught how to

answer questions but also how to probe with the right questions. This study by Fook and Sidhu was based on higher education students in general not specifically first-year students. This current study, therefore, attempted to fill the knowledge gap of finding out about the academic learning experiences of first-year students with regards to asking questions in class or after class.

It is, however, trite to understand that asking questions depends on the environment that is created for students to ask questions. Asking questions also depends on the willingness of the knowledge providers (lecturers, supervisors, tutors) to help those asking questions. Furthermore, students must also be confident to be able to ask questions.

Fook and Sidhu (2015) also stated that students are learning not only to acquire credits but also how to handle the data, observable phenomenon, and making decisions. Millet (2015) argues that the perceptions of students about their learning set up has a huge effect on their transition from high school into higher education life and their overall development and academic progression. This study, therefore, assessed such a concern and dug more into their experiences.

According to Lekena and Bayaga (2018), researchers contend that not only is lack of understanding of first-year experience insufficient to meet students' needs but also there is a substantial waste of student potential and capacity if not adequately understood. This study contributes to the understanding of first-year students' academic learning challenges.

An efficient transition during the first year at university can have a substantial impact on the students' academic progress in their studies (Mapuya 2018). However, these changes are factors that are not taken into consideration by some higher education institutions as such a knowledge gap exists which requires more investigation especially focusing on specific higher education institutions. Additionally, some institutional cultures make it difficult for first-year students to adjust to the university set up. Pather, Norodien-Fataar, Cupido and Mkonto (2017) mention that some institutional cultures alienate many first-year students; with a greater number of them lacking the necessary cultural and social capital, and therefore battle to engage efficiently at university.

Lekena and Bayaga (2018) observe the first-year stage is a transitional stage and there is no conclusive passage offered by universities that helps to cultivate the right frame of mind aimed at increasing success and tenacity in learning at tertiary education and beyond. As

a result, the transition for first-year students is often challenging as it implies that a student has to change from being a passive and dependent learner to an autonomous and active student; from being an ill-informed learner to being a skilled and well-informed authority; from being under parents' supervision to having more autonomy of their lives; from being an enthusiastic student to joining a substance abuse or drug culture among other changes (Hussey and Smith 2010).

Studies on student access into higher education reveal that access does not automatically guarantee meaningful social and academic involvement, realization of success, and/or levels of retention (Pather *et al.*, 2017). They argue that discussions about access to higher education provoke vital issues about student's acquirement of knowledge regarding the modules or subjects taught, admission, financial capacity, and social equity. Mapuya (2018) also found that there is a need for teaching personnel to deviate from standardized lectures to custom-made instruction which recognises that every student in the classroom has different requirements and capabilities. Additionally, Hodgson, Lam and Chow (2011) also argue that from secondary school, first-year students must adjust from the highly structured and supportive learning set up which encourages learning dependence to intricate learning set up at higher education institutions which emphasize independent learning. The discussions raised by the authors are focused on the integration of first-year students into an existing structure of higher learning. The integration is the key stage of transition that deserves to be analysed through apt investigations.

Diversity in the higher education institution has implications on the transition and learning process. Pather *et al*. (2017) mention that it is a common understanding that when people join higher education institutions they will be coming from different positions and statuses of extreme inequality with regards to schooling, class, race, and socio-economic resources. Accordingly, these diversities and other factors like the financial constraints affect the students' confidence and self-esteem which impacts their sense of belonging which impacts the learning process (Pym and Kapp, 2013). Students in their first year can experience critical challenges to full participation and engagement in the community of higher education such that they are unable to form an identity as a learner or student leading to realisation that higher education is not for them (O'Donnell, Kean and Stevens 2016). Evidently, there are several potential challenges that are encountered by first-year students during their first year of study and they are an area of concern. However, while

these challenges persist, it is known that a successful transition during the first year can have a significant effect on the remaining university life (Hodgson *et al.* 2011).

Alder (2018) also states that new students in universities navigate a complex transition from their old learning environment to their new learning especially if they have left home for university; in that transition, students negotiate a betwixt space to create a sense of belonging. Language barriers are also associated with diversity in a higher education learning institution. Classmates to classmates and students to university personnel can be affected by different language barriers that are part of higher education institution diversity. According to Fook and Sidhu (2015), some students have stated that some languages like English are a problem for some of them because English is a second language or a foreign language in their homes; hence it is difficult for them to learn effectively. For first-year students, this might be more complex as they will be adjusting to a new environment and dealing with such problems of language that adds to their challenges. Hodgson *et al.* (2011) assert that academic and social integration are the major hurdles for first-year university students.

According to Alder (2018) embarking on a higher education programme can be transformative, thus the student's selection of a course, with its specific outlooks, knowledge, and practices, impacts the emergence of their academic identity. There are desired outcomes that are expected after a student completes their higher education learning. Fook and Sidhu (2015) state that there is a pneumonic device and at the same time a manner to combine the characteristics that would line up with the university's mission to develop graduates for a better world, the characteristics were sequentially arranged to make up the word E-M-P-O-W-E-R-E-D. According to Fook and Sidhu (2015:605), these characteristics are:

- E - xercises effective communication

- M - anifests professional competence

- P - ossesses adequate knowledge of the discipline

- O- bserves professional ethics

- W- elcomes progressive innovation and change

- E - xhibits a deep sense of nationalism with a global outlook

- R - adiates a caring attitude for others

- E - ngages in problem-solving and decision making

- D - emonstrates personal integrity

According to the authors the ultimate goal in the learning process should result in students that are empowered who are able to exercise effective communication; manifest professional competence; possess adequate knowledge of the discipline; observe professional ethics; welcome progressive innovation and change; exhibit a deep sense of nationalism with a global outlook; radiate a caring attitude for others; engage in problem-solving and decision making, and demonstrate personal integrity. Therefore, laying the right foundation of an appropriate transition from school level to higher education for first-year students is very essential for them to grasp all these components that contribute to their academic success and realization of development in their lives. According to Alder (2018) studies have established that the experience of first-year students is crucial in the progression of their studies.

The transition from high school to higher education learning implies that first-year students must make an adjustment on time management, discipline, and organization. According to Naong, Zwane, Mogashoa and Fleischmann (2009) time-management, self-discipline, and independence are some of the components most of the first-year students struggle to master. Van der Meer, Jansen and Torenbeek (2010) found that it is difficult for some first-year students to regulate their self-study and effectively do their work despite acknowledging the need to have a plan to work independently. Furthermore, some of the students were unsure of how to organize their self-study schedule. The transition into a new life at a higher education may result in some students losing self-discipline. Govender, Nel and Mogotsi (2015) argue that the consumption of alcohol amongst first-year students in higher education institutions is a major challenge and often results in social and academic problems like high dropout rates, poor class attendance, and high-risk sexual behaviour. The authors further explain that as first-year students are away from parental supervision, they usually have a false sense of freedom and leisure time such that they lose their discipline. The adjustment of moving from home to a university might cause some confusion on their identity for some of the first-year students. This confusion might affect their organization, self-discipline, and time management. Govender *et al.* (2015) posit that young people usually do not have a good sense of self and are more likely to be influenced by their peers to fit in.

Briggs, Clark and Hall (2012) state that schools, colleges, and universities function autonomously and in partnership to ensure student progression to degree courses which precisely match their education to date and in line with their future career prospects. However, the authors further highlight that the transition involves the students creating a new identity for themselves as a higher education student. This transition comes with different expectations. Managing expectations is very crucial in the transition. University staff has expectations that are different from high school staff. Blair (2017) argues that there are expectations from university staff but the feedback to students is not very good. Additionally, first-year students also have academic expectations when they start university life. According to Briggs *et al.* (2012), studies on student expectations, aspirations, and decision making have revealed that students struggle to envisage university life and predicting their experience as university students as they do not know what to expect. Sometimes there is a mismatch between the student's pre-transitional expectations and the reality of being a first-year student at a higher education institution (Briggs *et al.*, 2012). Dealing with this reality can be challenging for first-year students.

Programmes such as orientation, mentoring, and induction are considered as essential in ensuring that first-year students can fit in into higher education learning. Dealing with the challenges of transitioning from high school to higher education, depends on what the students are exposed to. Gale and Parker (2014) mention that activities such as orientation classes, induction, mentoring programmes, placement, career programmes, and flexible course structures which take into consideration the different needs of, both full and part-time students, help with the dealing with challenges of transition. However, the implementation of such interventions is important as there are several higher education institutions that are making use of these interventions but not necessarily producing the desired results as noted by scholars like Govender *et al.* (2015) and Blair (2017). Blair (2017) argues that despite the obvious need of helping first-year students with the capacity to navigate through the learning transition to university, most higher education institutions focus on the induction period and this is customized towards providing generalized support that is linked to social and environmental acclimatization such as getting to meet and know fellow students and personnel. The author further remarks that these programmes are often restricted to the opening weeks of the academic year when there is little structured engagement by students in learning activities. The argument is the need for first-year students to be guided into independent learners is not limited to a few weeks. One of the

objectives focuses on ways that can be used to help first-year students to deal with the transitional learning challenges.

Successful transition from high school to higher education can lead to better results. According to Van Rens, Haelermans, Groot and Van den Brink (2018) successful transition for a child in an educational setup can help them to develop to the best of their abilities. The authors further state that unnecessary dropout, absenteeism, and runoff are avoided when there is a smooth transition in an educational set up. Lombard (2018) also argues that successful transition should be ready for higher education learning and career advancement. The scholar further explains that it means that transitional success entails academic adjustment from students' perceived ability to accomplish their desired academic outcomes and the acceptance of the academic environment. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the academic learning challenges that are faced by first-year students to ensure a smooth transition from high school to higher education.

4. Problem statement

Dealing with the transition is often difficult. The challenges associated with dealing with the transition of moving from high school to university are causing some first-year students to drop out as well as performing poorly in South Africa's tertiary institutions (Venezia and Jaeger, 2013; Swartz, *et al.*, 2017; Pather, 2018). Venezia and Jaeger (2013) posit that a large proportion of high school learners aspire to some type of post-secondary education, yet countless of them enter higher education institutions without the basic content knowledge, skills, or habits of mind they need to succeed. These concerns, therefore, necessitate the need to look at the transition process with a focus on the academic learning challenges among first-year students in South Africa.

5. Research Methodology

According to Pandey and Pandey (2015), research is an investigation carried out in a systematic way to find out something new concerning the topic under investigation. To carry out a systematic investigation, the research must make use of an appropriate research methodology. Creswell (2014) states that the choosing of a research methodology is primarily centred on the make-up of the problem that wants to be investigated, a researcher's experience, and the potential beneficiaries or audiences of the

research. The nature of the research problem investigated in this study required an analysis of the challenges faced in the transition process and requires an experiential understanding of events, as such a qualitative research methodology was used. According to Sutton and Austin (2015), qualitative research methodology is about investigating the truth in a process-oriented and experiential manner which provides a basis for an understanding of the compound events or experiences from the viewpoint of those living it. In essence, using this research methodology helped the researcher to attain the research aim as it has permitted the systematic investigation into the experiences of the participants experiencing the problem under investigation. Furthermore, Hays and Singh (2012) state that qualitative research methodology provides an opportunity for the researcher to explore the encounters of the study's participants within the context they are experiencing the encounters through a description of the process, attention to detailed account combined with the social structure as well as its people. The research methodology, therefore, allowed the researcher to find out in detail about the process of transition for first-year students which allows the researcher to get an insight into academic learning challenges faced in the process.

The study utilised an exploratory research design. According to Kumar (2014), a research design is a road map a study chooses to follow when investigating to find answers to the research problem. This study used a qualitative methodology, so exploratory research was appropriate for this study. Du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis and Bezuidenhout (2014) define an exploratory study design as a design that investigates the unknown issues with the main aim of developing and understanding the subject matter under investigation so as to propose answers to the research questions based on evidence. As such this research design is apt because it provides an understanding of the academic learning challenges faced by first-year students in a tertiary institution. Schutt (2018) underscore that exploratory research design attempts to investigate how people get along in an environment or setting understudy, what significances they give to occurrences, and what issues are important to them. This assertion suggests that using the exploratory research design, the researcher was able to analyse the way first-year students assimilate into the tertiary education set up and how the transition impacts their learning process. Bradley (2013) also mentions that exploratory research designs are used in investigations where the researcher intends to find new information, as such, studies are done with no strong preconceived outcomes or ideas of what will be obtained. The researcher did not have any

preconceived expectations or notions about the challenges faced by first-year students but sought to find out which transitional academic learning challenges first-year students are facing.

To conduct the study, the researcher looked at the population under investigation. Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.* (2014) purport that a population is a collection or set of individuals the researcher seeks to gather information from. The research population constituted all first-year students that were registered at the Durban Private Higher education institution. Considering, the assertion by Salkind (2017) that it is difficult to use the entire population for a study due to resource constraints like time and money, a sample was used for this study. According to Grove, Gray and Burns (2015), a sample is a selected group of elements or individuals in a study who signify the identified population. A sample is selected through a process called sampling. Sampling can be defined as the selection of a group of people, incidents, subjects, or another element which are used to conduct research (Grove & Gray, 2019). The sampling techniques used to select participants of a study can be probability or non-probability. According to Babbie (2016), probability sampling is about selecting a random sample from a list with all the names of all the subjects of the participant in the population under study. Furthermore, the author mentions that this sampling technique is usually used for selecting large representative samples which are mainly used for quantitative studies for inferential or parametric purposes. Resultantly, the use of probability sampling in this study is not apt. This study used a non-probability sampling technique. Non-probability sampling is a sampling that is largely based on the researcher's judgement and does not necessarily include all participants in the population (Grove & Gray, 2019). Furthermore, the study used non-probability sampling because as pointed out by Grove and Gray *(*2014) non-probability samples are used to seek to obtain an understanding of particular customs or behaviors that are obtainable in a particular period, setting, and context. In this case, the study investigated the transitional academic learning challenges experienced by first-year students in a particular tertiary institution at a certain period, that is, first-year period.

The non-probability sampling technique that was used for this study is purposive sampling. According to Ritchie, Lewis, Nichollis and Ormston (2014) purposive sampling refers to the subject or participants selected based on the identified features (like being the first year), which might be a socio-demographic component or any feature related to the study's aim like experiences, familiarity or relevant information. Therefore, 10 participants were

purposively selected for this study. Whitehead, LoBiondo-Wood and Haber (2012) posit that a sample of 4-40 subjects is regarded as adequate for qualitative research. The recruitment process entailed the researcher getting into contact with the Principal of the Durban Private Higher Education institution who authorised for the study to be conducted. The first-year classes were identified thereafter for the study. Therefore, the inclusion criteria were any students registered for their first year at the Durban Private Higher Education learning institution. The inclusion sampling criteria, as purported by Grove and Gray (2019), are the traits that the research respondent or subject should have. The exclusion criteria for this study will be the students who are not doing the first year. Grove and Gray (2019) state that exclusion sampling criteria consist of traits that can cause an individual not to be included or removed from the study.

5.1 Research Instrument

This study used a qualitative research method to collect data. Nuttavuthisit (2019) argues that one of the techniques used to collect qualitative data is the interview. However, the qualitative research method that was used for this study was an open-ended electronic questionnaire that was created using an interview guide to the specific objectives of the study. This form of data collection allows the researcher to get deep accounts of the nature of challenges that are experienced by first-year students at the learning institution. The researcher sought permission from the institution to distribute the electronic questionnaire for data collection purposes. The electronic questionnaire was a google form that was completed at the participants' convenience. The participants were given a letter of information with a full description of the research purpose and procedures in a simple language that can be understood by a layman. Participation in this study was entirely voluntary and it was clearly stated in the letter of information that should the participants wish to withdraw from the study, there was no penult or any associated consequences associated with that decision. Approximately 15-20 minutes were required to complete the electronic questionnaire. All completed electronic questionnaires were submitted to the researcher who was responsible for data handling and analysis. There were no names, addresses, or any other identifying information that was associated with the questionnaires but rather all electronic questionnaires were number coded. The completed electronic questionnaire will be stored for 5 years by the researcher on the researcher's personal computer, after which all the electronic files will be erased.

6. Results

The majority of participants (50%) reported that they expect good quality education when they transition from high school to higher tertiary education. However, one of the participants said,

> *To be able to be on campus, meet new people, learn new things, and maybe*
>
> *join club activities.*

Two of the participants reported that they expected to have an enjoyable study experience, having enough academic support from their facilitators. On the other hand, one reported that,

> *I expected everything to be easy like high school.*

Implied therefore is that the participants' expectations went beyond tuition to include an enable social environment that promotes thriving.

The transition from high school to a higher education institution was perceived differently among students, however, the majority of the participants reported that the transition was difficult, with someone saying,

> *For me, I found it a bit difficult because it is very different from school. Here we need to work independently and there is a lot of work to complete for each subject.*

While the other said

> *I found it to be difficult moving from high school to a tertiary institution because of the volume of work and I had to take responsibility for my studies.*

It appears; therefore, the transition is fraught with challenges which include student preparedness. Nonetheless, one participant reported that the transition was easy and found it simple to adapt to the new life at the higher education institute.

In terms of challenges experienced as first-year students, all participants reported that they have experienced different sorts of challenges, most of which were directly related to the Covid-19 pandemic which necessitated the advent of the digital world and online learning

in institutions. One of the commonly reported challenges is a lack of intrinsic motivation to work from home as suggested by one of the participants who said the following;

Online learning is difficult for those of us who have no motivation to work from home.

Nonetheless, only one participant indicated they did not face any motivational problems as indicated below.

I struggled to adapt easily as we have so much more freedom as compared to being in school. I also struggled with the amount of work that we needed to do and working through so many assessment tasks. I struggled with referencing as in school our teachers were not so strict with referencing. It is still something that I am trying to do properly so I always refer to the referencing guide when doing assignments.

The academic learning challenges faced by the students during their first year of studies included but not limited to difficulties in adapting to the new learning styles, keeping up with online learning currently necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic, unavailability of lecturers to offer one on one support to slow learners and those who struggle with academic writing skills. Some participants mentioned that they struggle to comprehend the subject's content because they are not native English speakers. Some of the responses include the following.

English is not my first language, so I struggle to understand sometimes what is being taught to us. I also struggle to write in English properly. This makes me get poor marks in my assignments.

Relatedly, someone said

I sometimes struggle to understand what the questions in assessments are asking for. It takes me time to fully understand what is required. I also struggle with subjects that require calculations as I do not like numbers.

The challenges are however not universal as one of the participants reported that they did not experience any academic challenges. However, because some students expected things to be on the same wavelength as from high school, and the fact that

they found things differently had caused a significant shock and surfaced their unpreparedness, which the researcher would call lack of preparation.

The Covid-19 pandemic's associated government instigated mitigation measures which include suspension of the academic programmes with the concomitant incorporation of the new generation technology solutions has been a major contributor to all the challenges. In the face of these challenges, students utilise different methods to be able to rectify these aforementioned challenges, most of which reported that they asked their peers for help and sometimes they will ask their lecturers to explain areas they are struggling within class. Nonetheless, one of the students reported that;

> *I try and spend more time on subjects that have calculations hoping that I can better understand them. I also try and work through more activities myself and test myself on sections I struggle with.*

and another one also said,

> *I use google to find out what I am struggling with. I ask my friends to explain to me what I don't know. I ask my lecturers for help too.*

Again, only one participant declared that,

> *I did not face any academic challenges. I am however a student who works independently and takes responsibility for my own learning.*

The participants had mixed feelings with regards to what the higher education institution is doing to help students deal with their challenges. Most of the participants said institutions are doing nothing to help students deal with their challenges. However, some mentioned that,

> *They are trying to help us by making us go into college if we can't learn online. They try hard to support us by having workshops with us*

Some participants also appreciated that they are getting data from the institution for use in online classes. However, these challenges have impacted the student's academic performance. Some students found it difficult to complete academic tasks due to a lack of understanding, limited financial resources for online learning packages.

From the higher education institution's perspective, participants reported that the institution should organise a lot of academic writing and coping strategies workshops. One of the participants reported that,

> *They must ask the students what academic challenges they are facing and help the students that are struggling academically so that the students can pass. They can offer extra lessons to those students that are struggling or provide them with extra activities to complete for sections they are struggling with.*

Students also suggested peer to peer solutions. One of the respondents said,

> *My challenges make me afraid to attempt and complete assessments as I do not know whether I am answering the questions correctly. I'm also afraid that I will not pass subjects where I have to calculate stuff because I am not good with numbers* and *in high school, we were not taught so much work like now. We are expected to cover so much work in our first year of studies. I am struggling because I am not understanding the work.*

The participants also suggest that lecturers should provide extra classes to slow learner students or create small study groups and sessions with second-year students in the same course. Another important factor mentioned was the idea of having tutorials that will be held in student's free time in a bid to help those struggling with the subject and give everyone an equal opportunity to excel in their studies.

6.1 Discussion

The results of this study show that first-year students do face some academic challenges when they transition from high school to a higher educational institution. These challenges vary among students and include, struggles with online learning and academic writing skills, struggling to adapt to the new challenge, new learning styles, and struggling to understand the English language for non-native English speakers. This is in line with the findings of other studies that found similar results. Stebelton and Soria (2013) reported that first-generation students struggle with English and have inadequate study skills. In addition to that, Fook and Sidhu (2015) reported that some students have stated that some languages like English are a problem for some of them because English is a second language or a foreign language in their homes; hence it is difficult for them to learn effectively. While responses indeed show that language is a challenge they are

wholesomely agreeing to the status quo. Higher education institutions have increased the quota of staff from previously marginalised communities, implying that they are able to understand the languages spoken by the majority of the students. There are chances that the problem is therefore cultural more than it is systemic.

The other challenges faced were based on the premise that students' prior expectation was not met which led to the worsening of the challenges. For example, this study showed that students expected things to be as easy as in high school but unfortunately, they found the workload to be heavier than expected and some complexity of other subjects. This supports the findings of Kantanis (2000) who also reported that the main factors that affected the full realisation of the students' expectations included difficulties in making friends as was expected, disappointment in discovering that the higher education institution was not as interesting, exciting, and much fun as was expected (Kantanis 2000). Again, Kantanis (2000) reported that the lecturers were not as accessible as students expected (Kantanis 2000). The results of this study are in line with this finding, where students reported that lecturers are not available for extra classes to assist students that are lagging. The case of staff failing to give students adequate attention could be a result of understaffing or competing and overwhelming priorities. Bender (2008) suggests that academics are limited for time due to many activities including teaching and learning, research, and community engagement.

The study also showed the need for higher education institutions to invest in creating campuses that allow social and academic growth. A study also by Kantanis (2000) showed results that are in line with the findings of this study. Kantanis (2000), reported that the most common expectation of first-year students prior to commencement of higher education was having fun, meeting new and different people, enjoying the freedom of learning, getting stimulated mentally by the new learning environment, and the opportunity of exploring interesting career choices. More recently Mutero and Govender (2019) have argued for the advancement of engaged creative placemaking on university campuses as a panacea to the challenges raised by the respondents.

In the current study, students reported that at times they do not understand what the questions are asking and that they experience difficulties in comprehending test questions. They also suggested that they can get assistance from senior students. Similarly, Mbirimi (2013) investigated the academic challenge faced by first-year students and reported that

students suggested they should get tutorial help from their peers who are in their second year of study or higher, have workshops where they are taught academic writing skills, and be encouraged to read articles. These findings reveal the efficacy of creating a socially friendly environment with a view to reducing pressure on academic staff as well as utilising the student population as a resource to advance the goal of adequately preparing students as they transition.

Findings from this study indicate that most students struggled with studying independently as expected of them by their lecturers. This problem is age-old as Kantanis (2000) reported on similar findings. Naong *et al.* 2009 also reported on independence as one of the components most of the first-year students struggle to master. In support of the same findings, Van der Meer *et al.* (2010) found that it is difficult for some first-year students to regulate their self-study. Solutions to the challenge include the urge for secondary school, first-year students to adjust from the highly structured and supportive learning set up which encourage learning dependence to intricate learning set up at higher education institutions that emphasize independent learning (Hodgson, Lam and Chow 2011). The findings and solutions are however quite on the role of academics. It is possible that some academics abdicate on the responsibility or that some are inadequately tooled to assist first-year students in transition.

Fook and Sidhu (2015) investigated the learning challenges faced by first-year students in higher education. In their study, they reported that students do not only need to be taught how to answer questions but also how to probe with the right questions. One of the participants in this study reported that,

> *I think that I have not learned in high school how to answer certain types of questions in assessments*

and this aligns well with the findings of Fook and Sidhu (2015). They also reported that students should have the confidence to ask questions in the class of the things they do not understand (Fook and Sidhu 2015). This is in line with the findings of this study where some of the students reported that sometimes they are afraid to ask questions during classes. Additionally, Pym and Kapp (2013) reported that this low self-esteem and reduced confidence sometimes emanates from the diversities and other factors like the financial which impacts their sense of belonging and impacts the learning process. This ultimately results in some students lagging behind, or not understanding some concepts and

eventually failing the exams by the year-end because there has been a backlog of content they did not understand. This study also points out the Covid-19 pandemic as one of the major contributing factors to their academic learning challenges and impact on performance.

Gale and Parker (2014) mention that activities such as orientation classes, induction, mentoring programmes, placement, career programmes, and flexible course structures which take into consideration the different needs of, both full and part-time students help in dealing with these academic learning challenges in the transition. This again is in line with the finding of this study where students suggested that extra classes, tutoring, and mentoring programs, workshops on life-on-campus, and academic writing skills would help to alleviate some of the academic challenges they are facing. Blair (2017) also suggests that these workshops should span the entire annual academic calendar rather than being confined to the first week of the calendar (Means Carowick, Weekley and Blair, 2017; Blair, 2017).

The results of this study are useful as a wake-up call for prospective students to be able to predict the possible challenges ahead of them so that they will be able to implement plans to counteract the forecasted academic challenges. This will in turn potentially improve the academic performance of students, raising their self-esteem and confidence for the future. On the same note, cases of academic-related stresses, depression, and other mental health illnesses will be significantly reduced. Current university students can also benefit from the results of this study, particularly those that are still battling with their studies. In addition, it is important to note the fact that, the results of this study are a letter to the Higher Education Institution stakeholders that bridges the gap between students and the institution policymakers. This study will be able to influence the institution's decision-makers to implement policies that will best solve the current academic learning challenges faced by these first-year students.

7. Ethical Considerations

Nuttavuthisit (2019) argues that research ethics are of vital importance especially in qualitative studies because qualitative studies generally involve engaging people particularly their private and social life. Therefore, the researcher observed various research ethical considerations. Firstly, the researcher ensured that informed consent is

sought from all participants prior to conducting the completion of the electronic questionnaire via the Higher Education institution. Brink, Van der Walt and Van Rensburg (2012) purport that a researcher has to ensure informed consent by ensuring that the participants are provided with enough information such that they are able to decide whether or not to take part in the research, this means providing full information on the study risks and benefits. The researcher provided a letter of information with a detailed description of the study and that no risks or benefits are anticipated or will occur.

The researcher also ensured voluntary participation. Brink *et al.* (2012) argue that the participants must be made aware of their free choice to participate before giving consent. All participants were informed of their freedom of choice, and that they can withdraw should they wish to do so, therefore ensuring voluntary participation.

To ensure confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to privacy as one of the ethical considerations for this study, no names, addresses, or any other identifying information was collected from the participants. Beins (2019) argues that participants should be assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Brink *et al.* (2012) state that participants ensure that their private information is not shared with other people and invading people's privacy must be averted. The researcher ensured that anonymity is upheld in this study by using pseudonyms/number-coded questionnaires. The researcher also is safely keeping data collected and is only using it for study purposes.

Lastly, this study was granted ethical clearance from the institution through which the researcher is studying.

8. Limitations of the Study

The study utilised a qualitative approach which uses a sampling method that relies on the researcher's judgement. The sample size was small as such it is difficult to generalize all the experiences of the students doing the first year. However, the research seeks to provide an understanding of what challenges the first-year students are facing and how it impacts their transition from secondary to tertiary more than generalizing the findings.

9. Contributions of the Study

The study has a knowledge contribution where it contributed towards a better understanding of the transitional academic learning challenges faced by first-year students

in South Africa. Using a qualitative research methodology allowed for the lived experiences of the participants to shed more light on the challenges faced by first-year students. In essence, the information generated from in-depth insightful data provided knowledge that covers the knowledge gap with regards to the transitional academic learning challenges faced by first-year students.

The study also has a practical contribution. From the study's findings, the researcher can make recommendations that are likely to help with designing programmes that can help first-year students to deal with different transitional academic learning challenges. The transitional academic learning challenges faced by first-year students is causing some of the first-year students to perform badly and also to dropout in some institutions in South Africa (Venezia and Jaeger, 2013; Swartz, *et al.*, 2017; Pather, 2018) as such an exploratory research design was used in this study which assisted in exploring to great detail the nature of the challenges and how best to tackle such challenges.

10. Conclusion and recommendations

This study concluded that students in their first year of studying at a higher education institution face several academic learning challenges some of which are necessitated by a lack of preparation and unmet expectations. While the focus was on students, an analysis of the results shows that some of the challenges are systemic. There is a need for academics to provide the right ambience for students to thrive. Future studies could look at the academics' readiness and ability to assist students to transition.

The study concluded that the workload is generally high and also the use of the English language among non-native English speakers, computer literacy skills among those that grew up in underserved communities find it difficult to quickly adapt to the current online learning styles. So many measures have been suggested to deal with these challenges which include, group discussions, extra lessons, tutorials, workshops on academic writing skills, and so on and so forth. It is important therefore that future studies look at the efficacy of peer to peer learning as well as the preconditions and structures needed to implement a peer to peer learning environment.

It is important to note that the results of this study cannot be generalised to all South African Higher Education Institutions due to the nature of the sample size included in this study that was extremely small. Therefore, future studies should consider doing this study on a

large scale and, if possible, on more than one institution. This study was initially planned to be interview-based but due to unforeseen circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic, the study ended up utilising an open-ended electronic questionnaire by means of a google form. Future studies should consider conducting objective structured interviews to gather detailed information about academic learning challenges among this population group.

11. Reference List

Alder, E. 2018. Becoming a student of English: Students' experiences of transition into the first year. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 17(2): 185-203.

Babbie, E. 2016. *The practice of social research*. 14th ed. Boston, MA: Cengage Learning.

Beins, B.C. 2019. *Research methods: A tool for life*. 4th ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bender, G., 2008. Exploring conceptual models for community engagement at higher education institutions in South Africa: conversation. *Perspectives in Education*, *26*(1):81-95.

Blair, A. 2017. Becoming culturally responsive: Reflections from an autoethnographic exploration of teaching and learning English in Brazil. In: *Culturally Responsive Pedagogy*. Springer: 99-119.

Bradley, N. 2013. *Marketing research: Tools and techniques*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Briggs A.R.J., Clark, J. and Hall, I. 2012. Building bridges: understanding student transition to university. *Quality in Higher Education*, 18(1): 3-21.

Brink, H., Van der Walt, C. and Van Rensburg, G. 2012. *Fundamentals of research methodology for health care professionals*. 3rd ed. Cape Town: Juta.

Chowdhury, M. F. 2014. Interpretivism in aiding our understanding of the contemporary social world. *Open Journal of Philosophy*, 4(3): 432-438.

Creswell, J. W. 2014. *Research design: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches.* 4th ed. New York: Sage.

Deen, A. and Leonard, L. 2015. Exploring potential challenges of first year student retention and success rates: A case of the school of tourism and hospitality, University of Johannesburg. South Africa. *African Journal for Physical Health Education, Recreation and Dance,* 2:233-241.

Denzin, N. K. and Lincolin, Y. S. 2013. *Strategies of qualitative inquiry.* 4th ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publication.

Department of Basic Education, [DoE]. 2015. National Senior Certificate examination 2015 diagnostic report. [Online]. Available at: http://www.ecexams.co.za/2015_Nov_Exam_Results/2015%20NSC%20Diagnostic%20Report.pdf [Accessed 15 June 2019].

Dhingra, M. and Dhingra, V. 2012. Research methodology. New Delhi: Enkay.

Du, Plooy-Cilliers, F., Davis,C. and bezuidenhout,R.M. 2014. *Research matters.* Cape town:Juta & Company Ltd.

Fook, C. Y. and Sidhu, G. K. 2015. Investigating learning challenges faced by students in higher education. *Procedia-social and behavioral sciences*, 186: 604-612.

Gale, T. and Parker, S. 2014. Navigating change: a typology of student transition in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 39(5): 734-753.

Govender, I., Nel, K. and Mogotsi, M.M. 2015. Experiences and opinions of first-year students at a previously disadvantaged medical university in South Africa about alcohol consumption. *South African Family Practice*, 57(5): 313-317.

Grove, S.K. and Gray, J.R. 2019. *Understanding nursing research: Building an evidence-based practi*ce. 7th ed. New Delhi: Elsevier Inc.

Grove, S.K., Gray, J.R. and Burns, N. 2015. *Understanding nursing research - e-Book: Building an evidence-based practice*. 6th ed. Missouri: Elsevier Saunders.

Hassel, S. and Ridout, N. 2018. An investigation of first-year students' and lecturers' expectations of university education. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8: 2218.

Hays, D. G. and Singh, A. A. 2012. *Qualitative inquiry in clinical and educational settings.* New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

Hodgson, P., Lam, P. and Chow, C. 2011. Assessment experience of first-year university students: dealing with the unfamiliar. In: Proceedings of *Enhancing Learning Experiences in Higher Education: International Conference*. 2-3.

Hussey, T. and Smith, P. 2010. Transitions in higher education. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 47(2): 155-164.

Kantanis, T. 2000. The role of social transition in students': adjustment to the first-year of university. *Journal of Institutional Research*, 9(1): 100-110.

Kumar, R. 2014. *Research methodology: A step by step guide for beginners.* 4th ed. London: Sage Publications.

Lekena, L.L. and Bayaga, A. 2018. Trend analysis of first year student experience in university. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 32(2): 157-175.

Lombard P.J.P. 2018. Factors that influence the transition from high school to higher education: a case of the Junior Tukkie programme. PhD dissertation. University of Pretoria.

Lowe, H. and Cook, A. 2003. Mind the gap: Are students prepared for higher education? *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 2(1): 53-76.

Mack, L. 2010. The philosophical underpinnings of educational research. *Polyglossia,*19. [Online]. Available at: http://en.apu.ac.jp/rcaps/uploads/fckeditor/publications/polyglossia/Polyglossia_V19_Lindsay.pdf [Accessed 19 April 2019].

Mapuya, M. 2018. First-year student teachers' perceptions of their constructivist classroom learning environments in Accounting 1 and implications for teacher educators. MEd dissertation. Central University of Technology.

Mbirimi, V. 2013. Academic writing challenges faced by first-year B. ED students at a South African university. MEd dissertation. University of the Witwatersrand.

McGhie, V.F. 2012. Factors impacting on first-year students' academic progress at a South African university. PhD dissertation. Stellenbosch University.

Means Carowick, B., Weekley, B. S. and Blair, E. 2017. Whose Job Is It? Helping First-Generation Students Apply for College By Bridging Gaps Between Families and High Schools.

Millet, H. K. 2015. The year of challenge: Challenges faced by first-year students based on individual identities. Honours mini-dissertation. James Madison University.

Mutero, I.T. and Govender, I.G., 2020. Advancing the Exploration of Engaged Creative-Placemaking Amongst Universities and Communities for Social Cohesion in South Africa. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, *55*(3) :429-445.

Naong, M. N., Zwane, M. G., Mogashoa, L. G. and Fleischmann, E. 2009. Challenges of Teaching First-Year Students at Institutions of Higher Learning. *International Education Studies*, 2 (2): 170-179.

Nester, L. 2016. Transition and integration experiences of first-year college students: A phenomenological inquiry into the lives of participants in outdoor orientation programs. PhD dissertation. East Tennessee State University.

Nickols, F. 2016. Change management 101: A Primer. [Online]. Available at: https://www.nickols.us/change.pdf [Accessed 15 June 2019].

Nieuwenhuis, J. 2016. Introducing qualitative research. In Maree. K. eds. *First steps in research*. 2nd ed. Pretoria: Van Schaik Publishers.

Nuttavuthisit, K. 2019. *Qualitative consumer and marketing research: The Asian perspectives and practices.* Bangkok: Springer Nature Singapore Pty Ltd.

O'Donnell, V., Kean, M. and Stevens, G. 2016. Student transition in Higher Education: Concepts, theories and practices. HEA Report. [Online]. Available at: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/resources/student_transition_in_higher_education.pdf [Accessed 23 June 2019].

Ormston, R., Spencer, L., Barnard, M. and Snape, D. 2014. The foundations of qualitative research. In: Ritchie, J., Lewis, J., Nicholls, C. M. and Ormston, R. eds. *Qualitative research practice: a guide for social science students and researchers*. 2nd ed. London: Sage, Chapter 1:1-23.

Pandey, P. and Pandey, M.M. 2015. *Research methodology: Tools and techniques.* Romania: Bridge Center.

Pather, S. 2018. South Africa: the high dropout rate of first-year university students. *Inside Education*, 23 March 2018. [Online]. Available at: https://www.insideeducation.org/featured/south-africa-high-drop-rate-first-year-university-students/ [Accessed 21 April 2019].

Pather, S., Norodien-Fataar, N., Cupido, X. and Mkonto, N. 2017. First-year students' experience of access and engagement at a University of Technology. *Journal of Education* (University of KwaZulu-Natal), (69): 161-184.

Pham, L. 2018. A Review of key paradigms: positivism, interpretivism and critical inquiry. [Online]. DOI:10.13140/RG.2.2.13995.54569 [Accessed 17 April 2019].

Pym, J. and Kapp, R. 2013. Harnessing agency: Towards a learning model for undergraduate students. *Studies in Higher Education*, 38 (2): 272-284.

Ritchie, J., Lewis, J., Nichollis, C. and Ormston, R. 2014. *Qualitative research practise. a guide for Social Science students & researchers*. London: Sage.

Salkind, N. 2017. *Exploring research.* Global edition. London: Pearson Education.

Schutt, R. K. 2018. *Investigating the social world: the process and practice of research*. 9th ed. London: Sage.

Stebleton, M. and Soria, K. 2013. Breaking down barriers: Academic obstacles of first-generation students at research universities.

Sutton, J. and Austin, Z. 2015. Qualitative research: Data collection, analysis, and management. *The Canadian Journal of Hospital Pharmacy*, 68(3),226-231.

Swartz, S., Mahali, A., Arogundade, E., Khalema, E. S., Rule, C., Cooper, A. Molefi, and Naidoo, P. 2017. Ready or not! Race, education and emancipation: A five-year longitudinal, qualitative study of agency and impasses to success amongst higher education students in a sample of South African universities. Client report submitted to the Centre for Critical Research on Race and Identity, University of KwaZulu-Natal/Department of Higher Education and Training. [Online]. Available at: www.hsrc.ac.za/en/research-outputs/ktree-doc/19043 [Accessed 24 June 2019].

Thanh, N.C. and Thanh, T.T. 2015. The interconnection between interpretivist paradigm and qualitative methods in education. *American Journal of Educational Science,* 1(2), 24-27. [Online]. Available at: http://www.aiscience.org/journal/ajes [Accessed 18 April 2019].

Thornton, L. 2016. Preparing students at-risk for successful transitions into institutions of higher education. MTeaching dissertation. University of Toronto.

Van der Meer, J., Jansen, E. and Torenbeek, M. 2010. 'It's almost a mindset that teachers need to change': first-year students' need to be inducted into time management. *Studies in Higher Education*, 35 (7): 777-791.

Van Rens, M., Haelermans, C., Groot, W. and Van den Brink, M.H. 2018. Facilitating a successful transition to secondary school: (How) Does it work? A systematic literature review. *Adolescent Research Review*, 3(1): 43-56.

Venezia, A. and Jaeger, L. 2013. Transitions from high school to college. *The Future of Children*, 23(1): 117-136.

Whitehead, D., LoBiondo-Wood, G. and Haber, J. 2012. Nursing and midwifery research: *Methods and critical appraisal for evidence-based practice*. 4th ed. Chatswood: Elsevier Health Sciences.

APPENDIX A: ONLINE QUESTIONNAIRE

RESEARCH SURVEY

AN ANALYSIS OF THE ACADEMIC CHALLENGES FACED BY FIRST YEAR STUDENTS IN A DURBAN PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION

This survey includes 10 open ended questions and is completely anonymous. You are required to include your answers below the questions included in this survey.

Date: ----------------------

Age: ----------------------

Research Questions

1. What were your expectations when you came to this higher education institution?

2. What do you think about the transition from high school to higher education?

3. Have you experienced any challenges as a first-year student?

4. Can you describe the learning academic challenges that you are facing as a first-year student?

5. How are these learning academic challenges affecting you as a first-year student?

6. What do you think are the major causes of these learning academic challenges?

7. Identify support mechanisms you use to deal with the learning challenges you face in this higher education institution.

8. What is the higher education institution doing to make sure that you are able to cope with the academic learning challenges that you are facing as a first-year student?

9. Which mechanisms do you think can be helpful in dealing with academic learning challenges that you are facing as a first-year student?

10. What measures do you think this higher education institution needs to take to ensure that first year students are able to deal with academic learning challenges?

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Your input is greatly appreciated.

APPENDIX B: COPY OF THE CONSENT FORM

EXPLANATORY INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS

To whom it may concern,

My name is Fathima Razack and I am a student at the Independent Institute of Education. I am currently conducting research under the supervision of Clodagh Mannion-Nash and my study is going to look at the transitional academic learning challenges faced by first-year students. I hope that this research will enhance our understanding of academic learning challenges faced by first-year students in order to come up with mechanisms that can help first-year students to perform better and not to drop out.

I would like to invite you to participate in my study. In order to explain to you what your participation in my study will involve, I have formulated questions that I will try to fully answer so that you can make an informed decision about whether or not to participate. If you have any additional questions that you feel are not addressed or explained in this information sheet, please do not hesitate to ask me for more information. Once you have read and understood all the information contained in this sheet and are willing to participate, please complete and sign the consent form below.

What will I be doing if I participate in your study?

I would like to invite you to participate in this research because you are a first-year student that could provide insight into the academic learning challenges faced by first-year students. If you decide to participate in this research, I would like for you to complete the questionnaire which includes open-ended questions for this study. You can decide whether or not to participate in this research. If you decide to participate, you can choose to withdraw at any time or to decide not to answer particular interview questions.

Are there any risks/ or discomforts involved in participating in this study?

Whether or not you decide to participate in this research, there will be no negative impact on you. There are no direct risks or benefits to you if you participate in this study. You might, however, indirectly find that it is helpful to talk about the academic learning challenges faced by first-year students. If you find at any stage that you are not comfortable with the line of questioning, you may withdraw or refrain from participating.

Do I have to participate in the study?

• Your inclusion in this study is completely voluntary;
• If you do not wish to participate in this study, you have every right not to do so;
• Even if you agree to participate in this study, you may withdraw at any time without having to provide an explanation for your decision

Will my identity be protected?

I promise to protect your identity. I will not use your name in any research summaries to come out of this research and I will also make sure that any other details are disguised so that nobody will be able to identify you. Nobody else, including anybody at The Independent Institute of Education, will have access to your interview information. I would like to use quotes when I discuss the findings of the research, but I will not use any recognisable information in these quotes that can be linked to you.

What will happen to the information that participants provide?

Once I have finished all interviews, I will write summaries to be included in my research report, which is a requirement to complete my Post Graduate Diploma in Higher Education. You may ask me to send you a summary of the research if you are interested in the final outcome of the study.

What happens if I have more questions about the study?

Please feel free to contact me or my supervisor should you have any questions or concerns about this research, or if there is anything you need to know before you decide whether or not to participate. You should not agree to participate unless you are completely comfortable with the procedures followed.

My contact details are as follows:
Fathima Razack

The contact details of my supervisor are as follows:
Clodagh Mannion-Nash

Consent form for participants

I, _____, agree to participate in the research conducted by (Fathima Razack) about academic learning challenges faced by first year students.

This research has been explained to me and I understand what participation in this research will involve. I understand that:

1. I agree to be interviewed for this research.

2. My confidentiality will be ensured. My name and personal details will be kept private.

3. My participation in this research is voluntary and I have the right to withdraw from the research at any time. There will be no repercussions should I choose to withdraw from the research.

4. I may choose not to answer any of the questions that are asked during the research interview.

5. I may be quoted directly when the research is published, but my identity will be protected.

_____   _____

Signature   Date